

# The Black Death

“Oh happy posterity, who will not experience such abysmal woe and who will look upon our testimony as a fable.” - Petrarch



## Primary Source:

### The onset of the Black Death was described by Giovanni Boccaccio (1313-1375):

... in the illustrious city of Florence, the fairest of all the cities of Italy, there made its appearance that deadly **pestilence**, which, whether **disseminated** by the influence of the **celestial** bodies, or sent upon us mortals by God in His just **wrath** by way of retribution for our **iniquities**, had had its origin some years before in the East...

In Florence, despite all that human wisdom and forethought could devise to avert it, as the cleansing of the city from many impurities by officials appointed for the purpose, the refusal of entrance to all sick folk, and the adoption of many precautions for the preservation of health; despite also humble **supplications** addressed to God, and often repeated both in public procession and otherwise by the **devout**; towards the beginning of the spring of the said year the doleful effects of the pestilence began to be horribly apparent...

...in men and women alike it first betrayed itself by the emergence of certain tumors in the groin or the armpits, some of which grew as large as a common apple, others as an egg, some more, some less, which the common folk called *gavoccioli*. From the two said parts of the body this deadly *gavocciolo* soon began to... spread itself in all directions **indifferently**; after which the form of the **malady** began to change, black spots or **livid** making their appearance in many cases on the arm or the thigh or elsewhere, now few and large, then minute and numerous. And as the *gavocciolo* had been and still were an **infallible** token of approaching death, such also were these spots...

...besides the qualified there was now a multitude both of men and of women who practised without having received the slightest **tincture** of medical science – and, being in ignorance of the plague’s source, failed to apply the proper remedies; in either case, not merely were those that recovered few, but almost all within three days from the appearance of the said symptoms, sooner or later, died...



## 1 Vocabulary: Find the words in the source that match those below:

anger: \_\_\_\_\_

sickness, illness: \_\_\_\_\_

certain, without fail: \_\_\_\_\_

pleas, prayers: \_\_\_\_\_

dark bluish grey: \_\_\_\_\_

tiny amount: \_\_\_\_\_

randomly: \_\_\_\_\_

faithful, religious: \_\_\_\_\_

heavenly: \_\_\_\_\_

plague: \_\_\_\_\_

sins: \_\_\_\_\_

spread: \_\_\_\_\_

**2** According to Boccaccio, what were two common assumptions about the origins of the plague (first paragraph)?

**3** How did the Florentines try to stop the spread of the plague into and within their city?

**4** How does Boccaccio describe the symptoms? What form of plague does he describe?

**5** Who besides doctors became involved in treating the plague?

# Medicine at the Time of the Black Death

The Catholic Church had complete power over educational institutions such as universities in the 14<sup>th</sup> century and could therefore limit what doctors learned. For example, the Church did not allow the dissection of bodies, so doctors had very limited opportunities to learn about anatomy. In one French medical school, there was only one practical anatomy lesson in two years: an abdomen was opened and examined, but there was very little detail provided.

Furthermore, the concept of the scientific method did not yet exist. Making careful, systematic observations, keeping precise records of symptoms and trying possible remedies in an orderly manner to discover their effects were simply not common practices. Many doctors, like the rest of the population, tended to be superstitious and ignorant, ready to attribute the plague to sinful behaviour and to the punishment of God. In a society where knowledge of the existence of bacteria did not exist, people searched for causes in what they understood and believed.

As a result of the poor state of medical knowledge, the doctors were helpless when the plague struck. A number of potions, powders and remedies were prescribed, but none of them worked. Indeed, many of them would have been likely to weaken the patient further.

## Suggested Remedies and Strategies

Ideas for dealing with the plague were founded on wild assumptions, blind terror, desperate hope, superstition, ignorance and sometimes prejudice. Here are some examples of recommendations:



People should **seclude themselves** from others and keep away from the infected air.



People should burn dry and scented woods to purify the air and fill their homes with **pleasant smelling plants** and flowers.



Take a **soothing potion**. While some potion recipes sound soothing, others could well have led to an even swifter death. Here is an example: take one ounce of gold and 11 ounces of quicksilver; dissolve and let the quicksilver escape; add 47 ounces of water and drink.



**Smell something horrible:** work in a hospital or latrine where the smells will somehow fortify you against the plague.



Stay **tranquil**.

**Open and cauterize\* the buboes** and then apply a substance to draw out the poison. One recipe for such a substance was a plaster made from gum resin, roots of white lilies and dried human excrement.



\*sear with a hot iron or caustic agent



The patient **should be bled** to release the bad blood.

**1** Rank the 7 strategies above from 1-7, with **1** meaning “most likely to be efficacious” and **7** meaning “most likely to kill you even before the plague did”.

**2** Circle the words below that could be used to describe the thought patterns and reactions that typically characterised people’s reactions to the plague. Then use the words to write 3-4 sentences as a summary.

enlightened + logical + systematic + superstitious + scientific + in panic  
ignorant + credulous + meticulous + research-based + rational + god-fearing

## Wheel Decide Quick Quiz

<http://wheeldecide.com/index.php?c1=3+symptoms+of+the+Black+Death&c2=3+types+of+plague&c3=Year+in+which+the+plague+struck+Europe&c4=Percentage+of+Europeans+believed+to+have+died+from+the+plague&c5=People+who+whipped+themselves&c6=People+who+became+the+scapegoats+for+the+plague&c7=3+common+assumptions+about+what+had+caused+the+plague&c8=3+aspects+of+the+medieval+world+that+made+it+easier+for+the+plague+to+spread&c9=Prognosis+for+each+form+of+plague&c10=Italian+writer+of+%22The+Decameron%22&c11=Strategies+and+remedies+commonly+used+to+combat+the+plague&c12=hallow&t=The+Black+Death&time=5&remove=1>

**MY SAMPLE ANSWER TO QUESTION 2 on second page (trying to utilise all the words provided):**

The people of medieval Europe did not possess the **scientific** knowledge to act **systematically** in response to the plague. They were **ignorant** of anatomy and the existence of bacteria; they lacked, for the most part, the **rational** and **research-based** techniques that might have allowed them to study the symptoms in a **meticulous** fashion and react to the plague in a planned and **logical** way. Furthermore, they were **credulous** and **superstitious**, ready to believe questionable theories like the one that the stars were responsible or God's wrath had come upon them. Their **fear of God** led many to the assumption that they should punish themselves to appease the divine judge. It also led to **panic** rather than to an **enlightened** and effective response to the disaster that they were experiencing.